

## Confirmation Sunday with Doubting Thomas

1 May 2011

Our gospel this morning is the story of “Doubting Thomas.” I always say Thomas gets a bad rap. The other disciples, minus Thomas, had been together when Jesus appeared to them after the resurrection, in John’s version of Luke’s Pentecost story, when the risen Christ appeared to the disciples and breathed on them that greeting which the church adopted as its own, “peace be with you.” He says, “Receive the Holy Spirit and forgive one another.” But Thomas missed all this, so when the witnesses told him, “We have seen the Lord,” he could not but express in all honesty his skepticism and reservations. “Unless I see for myself...unless I touch the Lord myself, I will not believe.”

You have to admire Thomas’ honesty. He has gotten a bad rap over the centuries of Christian history as his unique contribution to the mission of the early church got summed up with that one little word: doubting. The word has also gotten a bad rap. I won’t try to get you to change the way you remember Thomas (he will always be Doubting Thomas, I suspect), but I will try to change your mind this morning about the value of doubting. Frederick Buechner calls doubt “the ants in the pants of faith.” (*Wishful Thinking: A*

*Theological ABC*) I like that. Ants and doubt make you squirm. Doubt is not all bad. I grew up in a time when “I doubt it” was a popular expression that meant that you needed evidence, time, your own personal experience of the event in which others already believed. It was a mild put-down.

Skepticism can be healthy. Doubt protects faith from naivete and gullibility and the kind of innocence that can lead us in dangerous directions. Believing any old thing, after all, is not the point of our faith. I remember preaching on this text shortly after the 1997 appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet. A California cult had grown up around the belief that the comet’s next appearance meant the end of the world. That belief cost 39 believers their lives in a group suicide.

A few years ago, believing in angels was all the rage. But it was a weird kind of angelism that had little to do with what the Bible says about angels. I have long believed that the problem of our time is not atheism or agnosticism but fide-ism: too much belief. Our problem is not even disbelief, a synonym of doubt; our problem is misbelief: too much believing in the wrong things.

We need old Thomas, the doubter, don't we? We need the spiritual skeptic in these seductive times. We need to cultivate a healthy skepticism about the myriad things that seek to get us to believe in them. We are bombarded constantly through marketing to believe in things and buy them: we can't turn on our computers without pop-up ads; we can't drive down the street without bright flashing lights --strobes getting our attention and placing subliminal appetites in our unconscious minds. Commercial radio and TV are mostly about getting us to think we need to buy certain things.

Our faith should keep us scratching and squirming, keeping us unsettled and growing in the Lord Jesus, while at the same time rejecting other loyalties. We could adopt old Doubting Thomas as our patron saint. He wasn't so bad. It wasn't Thomas who sold Jesus down the river, betraying him for thirty lousy pieces of silver. (It was Judas Iscariot! The zealous true believer.) It wasn't Thomas who vehemently denied knowing Jesus three times, punctuated with vile curses. (It was Simon Peter, the so-called Rock on whom Christ would build his church.) It wasn't Thomas who sat with the disciples huddled in fear after the resurrection. He was out doing something else, perhaps clearing his mind in the aftermath of the crucifixion of Jesus. He just did not happen to be with the others when they saw their risen Lord. Thomas needed

some physical evidence, too. He needed to see for himself and touch Jesus. And when he did, old Doubting Thomas gave the most thorough and far-reaching confession of all: “My Lord, and my God!”

There is a little Thomas in all of us. It might not hurt if there was a little more. So let’s give the guy a break. Let’s not write him off quite so easily. He is honest and says what he’s thinking. He’s a straight shooter whose hands and heart agree. Thomas is “a brave and literal-minded maverick,” according to Barbara Brown Taylor, “who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had convinced himself that it was the right thing.” Because of Thomas, Jesus came back for another visit to the disciples and made their faith more firm. Because of Thomas, we need not deny our doubts or fear or skepticism. Thomas walks alongside of us as we stumble and trip over our own roadblocks to genuine faith. He assures us that the way is often challenging and littered with obstacles, but at the end of the road, at the end of the day, Jesus is there to pick us up and let us hold on to him.

Give old Thomas a break. Give yourself a break. The old saying is true, “those who don’t stand for something will fall for anything.” With Thomas as our guide, let’s be a little particular about what we

will believe in. The late great prophet, William Sloan Coffin, wrote, a short while after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight. You can’t think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart’s a stone, you can’t have decent thoughts.... A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.” Coffin encouraged us in “living the ordinary life extraordinarily well.” The effect of sin on humanity is to harden our hearts while softening our heads, whereas the gospel of Jesus, as embodied in our beloved Thomas today, works toward a hard head and a soft heart.

Our dear brothers and sisters of the confirmation class and new members class, Becca, Betty, Brady, Dave, Jodi, Karli and Kevin, you take a step of commitment today, a commitment to love and serve Jesus through the life and witness of this congregation. We’re not asking you to check your brains at the door, when you hang up your coat. We need you to think straight, to raise questions, to use your doubts and skepticism to keep us itching and scratching and squirming together, to choose wisely and well from a vast marketplace of possible things to believe in. Long ago, when the church was growing and the Roman Empire was dying, Roman rulers accused Christians of atheism. The trouble with these

followers of Jesus was that they did not accept and worship the many gods of the empire. They were not thrown to the lions because they were believers, but because they did not believe enough! The blood of these martyrs, Tertullian said, was seed for the early church. It was a seed of doubt, doubt that more gods were obviously better than just one.

We need hearts growing in love, soft hearts, that when combined with hard heads, find ever new ways to help the church fulfill its mission: to love the world in every way possible by bearing witness to the love of God in Jesus.

God bless you today as you re-affirm your baptism into the faith and family of Jesus, and accept the challenge to grow with your brothers and sisters in this household of faith. May God bless each of us as we renew our commitment to give ourselves to Jesus as his own, to love and serve him faithfully all the days of our lives.

At the end of the Evangelical Catechism which was part of my confirmation a few years back, was this vow: Lord Jesus, for thee we live, for thee we suffer, for thee we die. Lord Jesus, thine will we be in life and in death. Grant us, O Lord, eternal salvation. Amen.